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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000126

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SUBJECT: CATHOLIC - ORTHODOX RELATIONS: NATIONALITY COUNTS

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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) New hope for Catholic-Orthodox relations in the pontificate of Benedict XVI has been predicated in part upon the exit of the Polish Pope John Paul II, seen by many as an obstacle to improved relations with the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) because of his nationality and his role in the downfall of Communism. Now the Vatican has taken another step away from the Polish influence that rankles the Russians, replacing Polish Jesuit Jozef Maj, the working-level point man for the Catholic-Orthodox relationship. Maj's replacement, Slovene Jesuit Milan Zust, told us he was looking forward to Moscow's World Summit of Religious Leaders and noted that the Vatican was making an important gesture in sending several cardinals to the event. He also mentioned September's resumption of a Catholic-Orthodox theological working group in Belgrade, and the pope's planned visit to Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew in November as important upcoming events in this dialogue. Observers here are anxious to see if the personnel move and upcoming events will lead to better days in Catholic-Orthodox relations.

Polish Baggage

¶2. (C) Despite the exit of Pope John Paul II, Poles have maintained wide influence at the Vatican, owing to their entrenchment in the Vatican bureaucracy and their importance to the Holy See's vision for the Church (reftels). But in the field of Catholic-Orthodox relations, the Vatican is now just as happy to leave the Poles out of the picture. It was well-known during the pontificate of John Paul II that the pope's nationality was a hindrance to his achieving his dream of Catholic-Orthodox reconciliation -- a Church "breathing with two lungs, East and West". The complicated history of relations between Poland and Russia, combined with John Paul's historic role in the collapse of communism, made him a threatening figure for the Orthodox. Although the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is not the only Orthodox interlocutor for the Vatican, improved

relations with the ROC are a sine qua non for wider ecumenical reconciliation.

Jesuit Dismissed

13. (C) With the accession of Pope Benedict XVI, observers on both sides of the dialogue saw new opportunities for advances. Benedict clearly wanted to make such reconciliation one of his own priorities, and he had none of the Pope John Paul's Polish baggage. Now the Vatican has taken another step towards reconciliation (and away from Polish influence) behind the scenes, replacing Polish Jesuit Jozef Maj, the working-level point man for the Catholic-Orthodox relationship at the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity. Maj, a close embassy contact, was widely acknowledged as the Vatican's top expert in the field. He is a fluent Russian speaker and had worked at the Vatican on this and related issues since the early 1980s. We agree with Piotr Samerek, DCM at the Polish Embassy to the Holy See, who has commented to us that Maj knows Russia and the Orthodox world "inside out,"

14. (C) Despite his Polish roots, Maj had really become more Italian than Slav. He preferred to speak Italian even in meetings with Polish-speaking diplomats, and had spent only short periods in Poland since coming to Rome early in the pontificate of Pope John Paul II. Even so, his name and place of birth jumped out at the Russians, even from the pages of his Holy See passport. Contacts told us that the ROC put pressure on the Vatican, through Maj's boss, Cardinal Walter Kasper, to make a change. According to these sources, the Russians wanted the Vatican to dismiss the Pole and bring in new blood - someone who wouldn't - and couldn't -- recite the history of fits and starts in Catholic-Orthodox relations over the past years.

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Non-Threatening Slav

15. (C) In Maj's place, Kasper has assigned Jesuit Fr. Milan Zust, who as a Slovene shares Slavic blood with the Russians, but far less of the troubled history with which Poles and Russians struggle. "It's much less complicated for us" than it is for the Poles, affirmed Jakob Stunf, DCM of the Slovene Embassy to the Holy See. [Note: Stunf pointed out that Zust's appointment had brought Slovene influence at the Vatican to perhaps an all-time high. With Franc Rode, head of the Vatican's Congregation for Consecrated Life, recently receiving his cardinal's hat, and Slovenes holding an ambassadorship and several other important positions at the Vatican and abroad, the small nation is making its Catholic credentials count.]

16. (C) While Zust's experience in ecumenical dialogue cannot compare to that of Maj, he does have substantial background in the field, having studied and taught subjects connected to the Eastern Churches. When he learned of his appointment to Maj's position he went to Moscow for several months to work on his Russian and get to know the country and people better. He told us he developed good contacts at this time with ROC Patriarch Alexei II's FM equivalent, Metropolitan Kirill, and many in his office.

Zust Optimistic

17. (C) Zust is optimistic about the future of

Catholic-Orthodox relations, and told us he was looking forward to the World Summit of Religious Leaders in Moscow July 3-5. The Vatican was making an important gesture, Zust said, in sending several cardinals to the event. Even though the summit is a multi-lateral affair with little concrete planned for the bi-lateral issues between the two churches, Zust said he thought it would offer good opportunities to strengthen relations. Without the pressure of specific bi-lateral issues, Zust hoped that the two sides could focus more simply on their common ground as Christians, this perhaps highlighted by the presence of those from other faiths.

Next Stop: Belgrade

18. (C) Next, Zust noted, would be September's resumption of a Catholic-Orthodox theological working group, a project that lay dormant for some six years before the two sides revived it. The talks are due to focus on several issues of crucial import to Catholic-Orthodox relations, revolving around papal authority and the sacramental structure of the churches. In November, Pope Benedict is slated to go to Turkey where he will visit Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, the "first among equals" among Orthodox patriarchs. The trip will be important for Catholic-Orthodox relations, but will have to be handled carefully, as relations between Bartholomew and his fellow patriarchs (especially Alexei) have not been without problems.

Comment

19. (C) Maj was clearly upset about his dismissal, and there has been grumbling among the Poles in and around Vatican City about his ouster. However, the change may be the extra spark that Catholic-Orthodox relations need to overcome recent challenges. Zust appears open-minded, explaining to us that traditional Orthodox complaints about Catholic proselytism in their lands need to be considered carefully. Hearing this, one can see how Zust may be just the man the Orthodox want in this position. There's no doubt about that, said one disgruntled Pole who works at the Vatican. He claimed that the Russian Orthodox would now take advantage of a relative neophyte in the position and try to "get everything they can" out of the Catholic Church. The next few months should provide a good indication of whether the new hope many are holding out for this relationship is warranted. The episode has already underscored the importance Benedict continues to place on reconciliation with the Orthodox.
ROONEY